KURDISH QUESTION IN IRAN

Statelessness is a concept which emerged from modernity and modern nation-state concept. Nation-states have been appeared with modernity and these kind of states are found on the grounds of dominant ethnic group. Therefore, this has brought the marginalization of minorities and sometimes a total exclusion of “others”. Kurds are the only community who don’t have a state and seperated in the territories of four countries; Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria. In this study, I will focus on the emergence of Kurdish nationalism in Iran. In this study I will mostly refer to Abbas Vali’s book *Kürdistan Cumhuriyeti- İran’da Kürt Milliyetçiliğinin Oluşumu[[1]](#footnote-1)* which analyzes this process respectably.

The Constitution of 1906 set Persian as the formal language of the state and positioned it over other minority languages. Other languages were neither recognized nor denied. That was the same for other ethnic groups apart from Persian ethnicity. This constitution was silent towards/against other languages and ethnic groups while setting Persian as official language. Persian, therefore became the way to modernity. Marginalization of other ethnic identities and groups was necessary for unity and continuity. Although this constitution did not included an ethnic definition, we can see an exclusion of ethnic differences from political processes, denial of ethnic differences and marginalization of other ethnic identities from civil democratic sphere. There was a hidden denial behind this indifferent position of state.[[2]](#footnote-2) However, Iranian nationalism gained strength and political and economic progress were seen essential for a modern state. For this, a strong centralization was important. Centralization brings standardization of education, modern bureaucracy, a uniform tax system and military service. Therefore, an authoritarianism came to scene to attain these nationalist goals in the times of Pahlavi rule.[[3]](#footnote-3) According to Vali, Kurds were not in a position to oppose the denial of their identity in the constitution of new state. There was no political consciousness among Kurds of their own identity and common awareness of their common history. During the turbulent years of the constitutionalist movement in Iran, there can’t be seen a Kurdish intelligentsia with a nationalist orientation in politics or literature in Kurdistan. Also, there didn’t emerge a modern nationalist organization pursuing nationalist goals. Most of the Kurdish movements were counter-revolutionary at that time. Kurdish tribal chieftains joined forces to restore ancient regime, they aimed to safeguard their feudal domination to guarantee their financial sovereignty.

When we look at the Kurdish community in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, we see a pre-capitalist and agrarian community. Trade relations and productive forces were underdeveloped. Kurdish social life was dominated by primordial relations, loyalties and values characteristic of the tribal landowning class. The urban population was too small and was dependent upon agrarian production and the landowning class. It was not developed enough to create an urban culture for social reform and modernization. The tribal chieftains with their armies and local retinues were only political active sector of Kurdish community. Iranian Kurdistan was the most underdeveloped part of Kurdistan territory. Tribal politics were prominent and characterized with lineage, loyalties and primordial relations. There was an economic exploitation in tribes in the way that the lands were private property of tribal leader and the families were renting them from landowners. The relationship between Kurdish tribes and the Iranian state was defined on a feudal basis. Tribes were providing army for state in reply to the land that state gave them. Another function of Kurdish tribes was to fill the power vacuum created in the Kurdish urban centers after the destruction of Kurdish principalities. Then, Qajar government replaced the Kurdish tribal chiefs with members of the ruling family. This policy was useless because the appointed governers were outsider and they needed the need of tribal chiefs to govern the city they were appointed. This was the case in the Constitutional era. The tribal leaders joined counter-revolutionary movements to maintain and restore the feudal autocracy to safeguard their powers and privileges. The tribal leaders did not have the Kurdish national consciousness and did not defend the rights and identity of Kurdish people.

Semko movement was also an important point in Kurdish history. Folloowing the end of the First World War, there was a movement against Iranian government that has been defined as nationalist. But, Abbas Vali says that the character of the movement was tribal. The claim that the movement was nationalist printed in a journal called *Roj i Kurd*. But, Abbas Vali says that the political discourse of this journal remained largely alien to the most basic concepts of popular democratic politics characteristic of modern nationalist discourse, even though such concepts were fairly common in the discourse of Ottoman Kurdish intelligentsia. There can’t be a nationalist movement without using popular sovereignty, national rights and legitimacy notions.[[4]](#footnote-4) Semko movement gained a popularity and support until it was defeated by modernist absolutism founded by Reza Shah in 1925. Reza Shah re-ordered the state in favour of the conservative social and political forces represented by the growing number of large landlords and traditionalist clergy in Majlis since 1912.[[5]](#footnote-5) He created the institutional structure necessary for the territorialization of the centralizing functions of the state in an agrarian social formation. He aimed to found a modern army supported by a uniform tax regime and the restructured agrarian landed property. He destructed political structure and military organizations of tribes to centralize power in his own hands. He targeted all tribes in Iran, not only Kurdish tribes. His main aim was not to prevent only Kurdish movement but centralization and monopolization of power in Tehran. Reza Shah did not target Kurdish ethnic identity but the military and political organizations of Kurdish tribes. This shows the absence of a Kurdish organizational movement that has a nationalist ideology and a program. The only threat for Shah was tribal structure in Kurdistan. On the one side, Shah destructed the military power of tribes and on the other he strengthened economic power of tribes to include them into political mechanisms. After these, military service for all Iranian citizens regardless of ethnic origin became obligatory. Kurdish men were thus drafted into the new army and served under Iranian flag. The ideological function of national conscription, according to Vali, was to create a new uniform loyalty that superseded ethnic and primordial loyalties. Compulsory education and national curriculum, 1935 prohibition of Kurdish language, European style clothing law were things that aimed to create a uniform society but at the same time creators of Kurdish nationalism. Kurdish people resisted this uniformity policies and refused pressure of Persian identity over themselves. Their otherness against sovereign power has become the source of the common Kurdish identity and Kurdish identity became a resistant power against Pahlavi autocracy. There is an interesting paradox that the creators of Kurdish nationalism were the intelligentsia class people who were educated in the schools of Pahlavi.

Komalay JK was the semi-clandestine organization founded on 16 August 1942 in Mahabad. It emerged out of Komalay Azadixwazi Kurdistan which was another organization founded in 1932 in Eastern Kurdistan in Mukrian region. The founders of Komalay JK were from the modern sector, the traditional and modern urban petty bourgeois. The majority of the founding members were engaged in occupations which were either created by or associated with the development of the political, economic and administrative functions of the modern Kurdistan, and the organization included no landlord or mercantile bourgeois representation of any significance.[[6]](#footnote-6) The emergence of Komalay JK signifies the revival of civil society after abdication of Reza Shah and the collapse of absolutist regime in September 1941. The major indicator of this revival was writing Kurdish. Kurdish became the intellectual and political discourse among this small Kurdish intelligentsia. This shows the development of commodity relations, secular education and modern administrative processes in Iranian Kurdistan. Kurds from all parts of Kurdistan were able to join this organization. The official religion of this organization was Islam and Quranic verse was inscribed in the emblem of the official organ of Komalaj called *Nishtiman*. *Nishtiman* was in fact secular but it used Islamic references to gain the popular support. They were being blamed for atheism and communism and they had to use Islamic references to justify themselves. *Nishtiman* contained references to class structure in Kurdish community, invoked social and economic issues about social inequality between “haves and have-nots”, the poverty and ignorant of Kurdish masses, contrasted with the accumulation of wealth among the landowners and merchants.[[7]](#footnote-7) These all show the socialist tendencies of Nishtiman and Komalay JK. Although they used Islamic references to defend themselves against condemnations and to gain popular support, they had socialist and modernist tendencies in thought. However, *Nishtiman* was not using socialist discourse with regard to structural class categories and the social and economic issues invoked were attributed to subjective qualities and interests of the agents in Kurdish society. We can say that this journal uses socialist discourse for populist reasons. It did not call for any reform or alter the economic situations but it begged moral mercy of landowners for “more equality”. Another important thing here is that Komalay advocates a nationalist strategy which is totally civil-political, involving no military practices. From this we can see that they had seen the futility of military action against numerically, logistically and technologically superior powers in a landlocked terrain but also its radical assessment of the social structure, political organization and ideological orientation of military power in Kurdistan as traditionally possessed and controlled by tribal leaders. They didn’t want to share power with tribal leaders that they gave up military strategies. By doing this, they excluded the landowners and tribal leaders from leadership of the movement. Tribal relations and loyalties damaged nationalism and Komalay leadership saw this. Komalay JK included landowners and tribal leaders to centralize itself after it gained power. But this caused it to sink into primordial relations and loyalty that were against modern nationalist idea. Then, Komalay abolished and transformed into KDPI (Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran) in 1945.

Mahabad Republic was founded on 22 January 1946 and it was the product of the same social and political conditions that led the formation of KDPI. Soviets and Azeris opposed the view of Kurdish nationalist quest for an autonomous government. KDPI leadership was separated on this issue. But radical nationalists won this struggle. Popular support was also on the side of radical nationalists. Ghazi Muhammad now able to use this support to prevent tribal oppositions and Azeri opposition. Soviets approved Kurdish Republic and tribal leaders and Azeri democrats had to accept this. But this was only for a short term. When Soviet army left Kurdistan, neither tribal leaders not Azeri democrats had no reason to respect Kurdish nationalist project. KDPI had no support for an autonomous republic; but the pressure of popular support for republic and nationalist intelligentsia’s pressure made Ghazi Muhammad go radical nationalist way. The political and cultural expression of Kurdish identity for radical nationalists in KDPI was connected to the independence and autonomy ideal. They were believing in self determination of Kurdish community. The Azeri- Kurdish agreement of 23 April bore the hallmark of Soviet pragmatism. In this agreement the boundaries of Kurdish Republic were left unspecified, pending the final unification of Kurdistan. But the most adverse consequence of the agreement was that it gave a mandate to the Azeri government to represent the Kurds in the course of negotiations for autonomy with the central government. The Azeri government became the voice of Kurds. This damaged the claims of Kurds for autonomous republic.[[8]](#footnote-8) There wasn’t defined borders of Kurdish government on the map. In the Iranian constitution of 1906, the concept of minority, ethnic and cultural, was not defined on a territorial basis, but left ambiguous. Instead the term *mahalli* was used referring to the non-central provincial character of these ethnic and linguistic communities, rather than to any territorially delimited boundaries. The central government’s emphasis on the territorial qualification in the autonomy negotiations was only tactical, intended not only to refuse the Kurdish government to right to represent the Kurds but also to create a split in the Kurdish Azeri front, sowing seeds of distrust in their ranks.[[9]](#footnote-9) After Azeri-Kurdish agreement, Pishevari-Firuz treaty was assigned and this showed that the central government was certain that its insistence on the territorial qualification and the exclusion of the Kurdish government, had Soviet approval.

Throughout its brief existence, the republic was predominantly an urban administration. It could not spread its power and nationalist ideology among all the Kurdish people, especially peasantry. There can be a gap between the real and imagined boundaries of this republic. The political authority was weak and could not exceed its ideological doctrines to imagined boundaries. The legal jurisdiction of the republic was depended on its political power. This political authority collect taxes and muster and field military contingents within its domestic jurisdiction. The main source of government revenue was taxes collected mainly from urban population. If tax revenue was halted, the future of republic was to be endangered. The republic had a heterogeneous social structure including landowners,, urban petty bourgeois, trade bourgeois whose common ground was nationalism. The alliance could be halted. The development of civil society means democratic political sphere but this was not the case in Kurdish republic. There was a paradoxical situation between traditional social structure and ideologically modern tendencies of the republic government. Also, republic government was not able to change the tax regime because they did not have the power to face the opposition of landowners. Tribal leaders supported Mahabad republic that they feared of the revival of an authoritarian regime that they faced in the time of Reza Shah. Some conformist tribal leaders also supported KDPI with the fear of marginalization from Kurdish community. But all leaders had an opportunist attitude towards republic that they had connections also with Iranian government. Ghazi Muhammad knew this situation and tried to convince them in different ways but lack of authority, military force and tribal hegemony over government invalidated his efforts.

To sum up, tribal leaders’ hegemony over republic, primordial relations, loyaly, lack of a mature modern nationalist movement, opportunist attitudes of alliences that constituted republic, external factors (Soviets, Iran government, Britain), marginalization of Kurdish leaders, articulation of Kurdishness to other ethnic identities, drifting from political claims to cultural demands, economical factors such as underdeveloped pre capitalist system and irregularity of tax regime, populist interests are the factors that caused Mahabad republic collapse on January 1946. According to Abbas Vali, the collapse of republic is not only a past event, its also a living event in memories. It does not only live in past but shapes today’s practices and discourse. Also, Kurdish question in Iran shows the reality that the suppression of differences causes this traumatic situations and recognizing differences and improving civil democratic politics sphere are important for peace.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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1. Abbas Vali, *Kürdistan Cumhuriyeti- İran’da Kürt Milliyetçiliğinin Oluşumu* (İstanbul: Avesta Yayınları, 2010) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid, 23. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid, 24. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid, 36. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid, 37. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid, 42. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid, 43. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Ibid, 91. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Ibid, 92. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)